Perceptions of Secondary Principals in Texas Concerning Leadership Skills Attained Through Membership and Participation in the FFA

Steve Fraze
James H. Smith
Mark Kistler
Texas Tech University

Jessica Colvin, Snyder High School, Snyder, TX

Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to determine Texas secondary principals' perceptions of leadership skills attained through membership and participation in the FFA program. The target population consisted of Texas secondary principals located at schools with an agricultural science program and chartered FFA chapter. A stratified sample of 288 principals was selected. A questionnaire was developed by the researcher concerning leadership skills and the FFA program. After pilot testing of the questionnaire, it was mailed to the participants of the study to complete.

Overall, secondary principals in Texas agreed that membership and participation in the FFA program offers students the opportunity to develop leadership skills. Principals surveyed also agreed that participation in the FFA program helps students to generate goals, establish priorities, develop responsibility, enhance social skills, improve problem solving abilities, listen to others and develop honesty and integrity.

The conclusions drawn from this study have opened the door for further research. Now that Texas secondary principals' perceptions of the attainment of leadership skills by students through membership and participation in the FFA program have been gathered and analyzed, their perceptions regarding other important issues such as curriculum, course offerings and graduation requirements should be collected and analyzed. The results from this study and future studies can be used to build and create relationships between agricultural science teachers and secondary principals allowing them to work together more efficiently to the benefit of the student.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The mission of the National FFA Organization is to make a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education (National FFA Organization, 2002). The FFA consists of programs and activities that allow members to develop communication skills, conduct and participate in meetings, manage financial matters, strengthen problem-solving abilities and assume civic responsibility (Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas, 2002). Activities of the FFA chapter are an integral part of the Agricultural Science and Technology education program (Texas Education Agency, 2002).

Currently, there are 90,000 students enrolled in Agricultural Science and Technology courses in the state of Texas (Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas, 2002). Enrollment in these courses and participation in the FFA allows students to develop skills that are highly valued by employers such as leadership, teamwork, personal responsibility, problem solving, management, and analysis (Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas, 2002). However, increased high school graduation requirements have put pressure on agriculture programs by limiting the opportunities for students to enroll in elective courses (Thompson, 2001).

The National Research Council concluded that increased requirements for high school graduation would reduce the time available for electives and extracurricular activities (National Research Council, 1988). A study in Idaho found that 65% of state supervisors and 88% of secondary agriculture teachers agreed that many students were unable to enroll in agricultural education because of high school graduation requirements (Connors, 1998). Teachers in Arkansas felt that offering a science credit for agricultural courses would increase enrollment, benefit students, and enhance the program image (Johnson, 1995).

Currently in the state of Texas, there are 40 different classes offered through Agricultural Science and Technology Education. Certified teachers, administrators, students, and advisory committees determine the courses that are offered to the students (Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas, 2002). School principals are key decision-makers in the curriculum at their high school and influential in the continuation of the agricultural science program. Although they do not have full control over curriculum, their influence has great impact and their perceptions of agricultural education and technology courses determine its success (Johnson & Newman, 1993). Therefore, the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas concerning leadership skills attained through membership and participation in the FFA program are very important to the success of the FFA program.

Literature indicates that secondary principals are overall supportive of the agricultural education program. There have been numerous studies concerning perceptions of secondary principals concerning different aspects of agricultural education. However, there has never been a study conducted regarding the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas

concerning the leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program.

"Leadership is the ability to influence the activities of an individual or group toward the achievement of a goal." (Addison, 1985, p. 1) Examples of leadership skills are organization and delegation, problem solving, shared leadership, communication, futuristic thinking, decision-making, conflict resolution, goal setting, group dynamics, divergent thinking and time management.

Development of leadership skills in youth has long been a goal of many organizations and clubs including FFA and 4-H. Public speaking, holding an office and participating in meetings are all ways that youth develop leadership skills (Dormody & Seevers, 1994).

Dormody and Seevers (1994) surveyed 370 students from Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico that were members of the FFA. The purpose of the survey was to determine if leadership life skills development of the FFA member was affected by participation in leadership activities. Independent variables in the study included participation in FFA leadership activities, achievement expectancy, self-esteem, years in FFA, age, ethnicity, gender, and place of residence. The dependent variable was the development of leadership life skills. The conclusions from this survey indicated that there was a positive relationship between youth leadership life skills development and achievement expectancy (i.e. what the FFA members expected of themselves and of others during FFA activities and projects). Females also had higher youth leadership life skills development than males. However, there was no correlation between leadership life skill development and self-esteem, years in FFA, ethnicity, or place of residence.

Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) surveyed 371 FFA members from Iowa during the 1994-1995 school year. The purpose of the study was to determine if there was a significant relationship between the member's self-perceived youth leadership and life skills development and their participation in youth leadership activities. The researchers found that there was a positive relationship between FFA leadership activities such as chapter meetings and SAE projects and the member's scores on the survey. The researchers indicate that greater cooperation between agricultural educators, representatives of the industry, and leaders of other youth organizations is needed to help build leadership and life skill development in all youth.

Purpose and Objectives

The major purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of Texas secondary principals concerning leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics of Texas principals at secondary schools that have an agricultural science program and chartered FFA chapter?

2. What are the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas concerning leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program?

3. Is there a relationship between demographic characteristics of secondary principals in Texas and their perceptions of leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program?

Procedures

A descriptive-correlational design was used in this study. It was designed to assess the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas concerning leadership skills attained through membership and participation in the FFA program. A mail questionnaire was the method of data collection.

The target population of this study was secondary principals in the state of Texas during the 2002-2003 school year at schools that had an agricultural science program and chartered FFA chapter. In 2002, there were 1018 schools with agricultural science programs and chartered FFA chapters (Instructional Materials Service, 2002). It was determined to take a random sample of the target population due to the fact that the target population was so large.

The sample consisted of 288 secondary principals in Texas at high schools that had an agricultural science program and a chartered FFA chapter. The sample was stratified among the 10 FFA areas in the state. Secondary principals were randomly chosen in each area. The number of secondary principals chosen from each area depended on how many schools that area had in comparison to the overall number of schools in Texas with agricultural science programs and chartered FFA chapters.

The data collection instrument used was a researcher developed questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed by using previous surveys used by researchers to analyze perceptions of high school administrators or superintendents regarding agricultural education teachers (Hinkson, 1999), the agricultural education program (Pavelock, 2000), and vocational education (Marrs, 1983). A questionnaire used by Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) in Iowa that measured self-perceived leadership and life skills in FFA members was also used to develop the questionnaire for this study.

One section of the questionnaire was titled "Leadership Skills and the FFA Program". There were 20 statements that respondents agreed or disagreed with using a Likert-type scale of 4=*Strongly Agree*, 3=*Agree*, 2=*Disagree*, 1=*Strongly Disagree* and 0=*Don't Know/No Opinion*. Another section was titled "Demographic Information" and collected demographic variables such as: school location, classification of school, years as a secondary principal, years as a classroom teacher, primary teaching area, teaching experience in career and technology education, teaching experience in agricultural science, enrollment in agricultural

education in high school or college, children's enrollment in agricultural education in high school or college, membership or volunteering for FFA or 4-H programs, children's membership or volunteering for FFA or 4-H programs, attendance of particular FFA activities, recognition by the local FFA chapter, work experience in agriculture, size of hometown, primary source of income for community, highest degree held, major area of study, age, and gender.

The instrument was reviewed by the faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications at Texas Tech University for face and content validity. After making necessary changes to the instrument, a pilot test involving 30 secondary principals from the target population that were not selected in the stratified random sample was conducted. The pilot test required the secondary principals chosen to complete the actual questionnaire. The participants were also asked for any comments or suggestions to help make the questionnaire better or cleaner. Pilot test data was analyzed for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The leadership skills section of the questionnaire had reliability of .85. Slight modifications were made to the questionnaire before being mailed to the stratified random sample.

The questionnaire was coded (for nonresponse purposes) and mailed to the stratified random sample with a cover letter and self-addressed stamped envelope on April 2, 2003. A thank you/reminder postcard was sent on April 11, 2003, to all participants of the study. A second questionnaire, new cover letter and self-addressed stamped envelope were sent to nonrespondents on April 30, 2003. The cut off date for responses was May 30, 2003. There were 213 questionnaires returned for an overall response rate of 74%.

Responses to the questionnaire were coded and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. SPSS 11.0 for Windows was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequencies and percentages of responses to questions and statements on the questionnaire pertaining to the respondents' characteristics and perceptions concerning leadership skills attained though membership and participation in the FFA program. Correlation calculations were performed to determine if any significant relationships existed between chosen respondent characteristics and perceptions of secondary principals regarding leadership skills attained through membership and participation in the FFA program.

Findings

The target population in this study was secondary principals in Texas at schools with an agricultural science program and chartered FFA chapter. Responses of participants regarding research question 1, "What are the demographic characteristics of Texas principals at secondary schools that have an agricultural science program and chartered FFA chapter?" are discussed in the following paragraphs.

A majority (85.9%) of secondary principals that responded were male. Over three-fourths of respondents were within the ages of 40 to 59 (82.5%). The largest numbers of respondents (34.6%) were raised in rural areas. Education was the area that most

respondents majored in (70.0%). A majority (98.6%) of respondents received master's degrees or higher.

Over two-thirds (69.8%) of respondents had been a secondary principal for nine years or less. The largest percentage (32.5%) of respondents had been classroom teachers for ten to fourteen years. A majority (69.8%) of respondents indicated that their primary teaching area had been academics. The largest number of respondents indicated that they did not have any teaching experience in career and technology education (80.7%) or agricultural science (91.0%). Sixty percent (60.1%) of the respondents indicated that they had work experience in agriculture.

Over half (51.4%) of respondents were at schools that were located in small towns. A majority (51.4%) of the respondents' schools were classified as 1A (29.2%) or 2A (22.2%). Half (50.0%) of the respondents identified agriculture services as the primary source of income for the school community.

A minority (38.2%) of respondents were enrolled in agricultural science/vocational programs in high school and/or college. Almost one-third (30.2%) of respondents were members of FFA and had volunteered for FFA (33.0%). In regards to 4-H, 19.3% of respondents were members and 17.9% had volunteered for 4-H.

A minority (36.8%) of respondents indicated that they have or have had children enrolled in high school agricultural science/vocational agriculture course(s). One-third (30.2%) of respondents had children that were members of FFA and 8.5% had children that were volunteers of FFA. One-fifth (21.7%) of respondents had children that were members of 4-H and 4.7% had volunteered for 4-H.

Of the secondary principals that responded to this study, 46.9% had received recognition from their local FFA chapter. Eighty-five percent of respondents had attended a chapter FFA banquet. Respondents had also attended the following: FFA district banquets (37.1%), FFA area conventions (17.8%), the FFA state convention (11.7%), local livestock shows (89.2%), county livestock shows (85.9%), major livestock shows (63.8%), FFA judging contests (38.0%) and FFA leadership contests (27.2%).

In order to answer research question 2 "What are the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas concerning leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program?" respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements pertaining to leadership skills and the FFA. The participants' responses are illustrated in Table 1.

Secondary principals agreed very highly (M=3.96, SD=.205) leadership characteristics are of importance. They also agreed (M=3.71, SD=.473) leadership qualities are developed over time. Respondents also agreed (M=2.92, SD=.790) every student has leadership potential. Respondents disagreed (M=2.36, SD=.770) individuals are born leaders.

Respondents agreed (*M*=3.62, *SD*=.553) an officer position in the FFA chapter promotes leadership and the FFA program offers students an opportunity to develop leadership skills (*M*=3.70, *SD*=.519). Respondents also agreed that participation in the FFA helps students to: generate goals (*M*=3.50, *SD*=.606), establish priorities (*M*=3.48, *SD*=.614), develop responsibility (*M*=3.64, *SD*=.539), enhance social skills (*M*=3.51, *SD*=.623), improve problem-solving abilities (*M*=3.45, *SD*=.666), listen to others effectively (*M*=3.39, *SD*=.702), and develop honesty and integrity (*M*=3.44, *SD*=.714).

Table 1.
Respondents' agreement with statements regarding leadership skills and the FFA program

Statement	No.	Mean*	**SD**
I believe:			
Leadership characteristics are of importance.	206	3.96	.205
Leadership qualities are developed over time.	207	3.71	.473
Individuals are "born leaders".	205	2.36	.770
Every student has leadership potential.	202	2.92	.790
An officer position within the FFA Chapter promotes leadership.	206	3.62	.553
The FFA program offers students an opportunity to develop leadership skills.	205	3.70	.519
Participation in the FFA program helps students to:			
generate goals.	207	3.50	.606
establish priorities.	207	3.48	.614
develop responsibility.	207	3.64	.539
enhance social skills.	206	3.51	.623
improve problem solving abilities.	206	3.45	.666
listen to others effectively.	206	3.39	.702
develop honesty and integrity.	207	3.44	.714
I am familiar with:			
FFA Career Development Events (judging and leadership contests).	207	3.27	.712
The roles and duties of the FFA chapter officers.	206	3.15	.845
The opening and closing ceremonies of an FFA meeting.	206	3.13	.966
The degrees of membership in the FFA.	206	2.82	1.034
Area FFA Leadership Camps.	206	2.51	1.172
Made for Excellence Conference (MFE).	206	1.95	1.225
Washington Leadership Conference (WLC).	206	2.08	1.256

* Scale: 0 through 4 where 0=*Don't Know/No Opinion*, 1=*Strongly Disagree*, 2=*Disagree*, 3=*Agree*, 4=*Strongly Agree*

Respondents agreed they were familiar with FFA career development events (*M*=3.27, *SD*=.712) and the roles and duties of the FFA chapter officers (*M*=3.15, *SD*=.845). They were also familiar with the opening and closing ceremonies of an FFA meeting (*M*=3.13, *SD*=.966). They were familiar with the degrees of membership in the FFA (*M*=2.82, *SD*=1.034) and area leadership camps (*M*=2.51, *SD*=1.172). Respondents were least familiar with the Made for Excellence Conference (MFE) (*M*=1.95, *SD*=1.225) and the Washington Leadership Conference (WLC) (*M*=2.08, *SD*=1.256).

Research question 3, "Is there a relationship between demographic characteristics of secondary principals in Texas and their perceptions of leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program?" was addressed by conducting correlation analyses between chosen independent demographic variables and constructs of the dependent variables, the dependent variables being perceptions of secondary principals concerning statements regarding leadership skills.

The only relationships that were found to be significant in this study dealt with demographic variables and familiarity with leadership development events and career development events. A secondary principal that had experience teaching agricultural science or career and technology education was found to be more familiar with leadership development events and career development events. Also, respondents that had been members of FFA or volunteers of FFA were more familiar with leadership development events and career development events. Respondents that had been enrolled in an agricultural science/vocational program in high school and/or college were also more familiar with leadership development events and career development events. Respondents that had majored in agriculture were also found to be more familiar with leadership career development events and career development events. Respondents that had children that were FFA members were also more familiar with leadership and career development events. Respondents whose primary teaching area was career and technology education were found to be more familiar with leadership development events and career development events, whereas respondents whose primary teaching area was fine arts were least familiar.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are restricted to the population surveyed. These conclusions are based on the interpretation of data presented in the study. A majority (85.9%) of secondary principals are male and are in the age range of 40 to 49 years (44.3%). One-third (34.6%) of principals were raised in rural areas. The major area of study for secondary principals is education (70.0%). A majority (98.6%) of secondary principals have received a master's degree or higher. Over half (51.4%) of secondary principals are at schools that are located in small towns and classified as 1A (29.2%) or 2A (22.2%). The primary source of income for half (50.0%) of school communities is agriculture services.

Less than one-third (30.2%) of secondary principals have been in their current position for more than 10 years. The remaining 69.8% have been in this position for nine years or less. More than 60% of secondary principals taught in the classroom for 14 years or

less and the primary teaching areas for most secondary principals were academic areas such as social studies, English, and science. Almost one-fifth (19.3%) of secondary principals have experience in teaching career and technology education whereas only 9% of secondary principals have experience teaching agricultural science. Sixty percent of secondary principals have work experience in agriculture.

Over one-third (38.2%) of secondary principals were enrolled in an agricultural science/vocational program in high school and/or college. Thirty percent of secondary principals were members of FFA and one-third (33.0%) volunteer or have volunteered for FFA. Almost one-fifth (19.3%) of secondary principals were members in 4-H and 17.9% volunteer or have volunteered for 4-H. Over one-third (36.8%) of secondary principals have children that are or have been enrolled in high school agricultural science/vocational agriculture course(s). Thirty percent of secondary principals have children that are or have been members of FFA and only 8.5% have children that are or have been volunteers of the FFA. More than a fifth (21.7%) of secondary principals have children that are or have been members of 4-H and only 4.7% have children that are or have been volunteers of the FFA. Secondary principals have been involved with the FFA chapter by attending chapter banquets, district banquets, area conventions, state conventions, local livestock shows, county livestock shows, major livestock shows, FFA judging contests, and FFA leadership contests. Almost half (46.9%) of secondary principals have been recognized by their local FFA chapters.

Secondary principals agree that the FFA program allows students an opportunity to develop leadership skills. Secondary principals perceptions of leadership skills attained through membership and participation in the FFA program were not affected by demographic variables such as age, gender, or school classification. However, experience in teaching agricultural science and career and technology education helped to familiarize secondary principals with leadership development events and career development events. Also, secondary principals whose major area of study was agriculture are more familiar with leadership development events and career development events.

Overall, secondary principals that were FFA members or enrolled in agricultural science/vocational program in high school and/or college are more familiar with leadership development events and career development events. Secondary principals that volunteer for FFA or have children that are FFA members are also more familiar with leadership development events and career development events.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made by the researcher as a result of this study:

1. The results of this study should be made available to agricultural science teachers in the state of Texas. The annual agricultural science teachers' conference, the Vocational Agricultural Teachers Association of Texas newsletter, The Ag Education Magazine and other publications targeting

agricultural science teachers in Texas should include the results of this study in future programs or publications. Making this information available to agricultural science teachers will help to inform them of the perceptions of secondary principals in Texas concerning leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program.

2. The results of this study should be made available to secondary principals in the state of Texas. The perceptions that were found in this study were very positive and would perhaps create interest in the agricultural science program and FFA program among secondary principals that do not have agricultural science programs and chartered FFA chapters at their schools. This study distinguishes the fact that secondary principals agree that the FFA program offers students a chance to develop leadership skills. Perhaps if this study was brought to the attention of secondary principals, their perceptions on issues such as curriculum, course offerings and graduation requirements would be influenced.

3. The findings of this study should be presented to students studying to be future agricultural science teachers. The results of this study will help prepare future agricultural science teachers by helping them to realize the perceptions of secondary principals concerning leadership skills attained by students through membership and participation in the FFA program. Realization of these perceptions could help future agricultural science teachers develop and establish agricultural science programs and FFA chapters that do in fact provide students with the opportunity to develop leadership skills.

4. The findings of this study also revealed that less than one-half of secondary principals have been recognized by their local FFA chapter. The results of this study show that secondary principals agree that membership and participation in the FFA program gives students an opportunity to develop leadership skills, therefore they are generally supportive of the FFA program and should receive recognition from the local FFA chapter.

5. The results of this study also indicated that secondary principals were not especially familiar with leadership development events and career development events. This could be remedied by more communication between the agricultural science teacher and the secondary principal. Making the principal more aware of activities occurring within the local FFA chapter and inviting them to be a part of the activities might help to familiarize them with these events and increase support of the program.

6. Now that Texas secondary principals' perceptions of the attainment of leadership and life skills by students through membership and participation in the FFA have been gathered and analyzed, their perceptions regarding curriculum, course offerings and graduation requirements need to be collected

and analyzed. The two studies can be compared to see if their perceptions of the FFA program are reflected in their perceptions regarding curriculum, course offerings and graduation requirements.

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